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Review

Essays on *Atlas Shrugged*

Fred Seddon

Essays on Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged
Robert Mayhew, editor
Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Press, 2009
xv + 516 pp., index

With this volume, Robert Mayhew has now edited four books, each devoted to one of Ayn Rands' novels. This last effort is a worthy final installment. Let's look at a few of the 22 essays.

The opening essay, "The Part and Chapter Headings of *Atlas Shrugged*," by Onkar Ghate recalled to mind a similar effort of my own, "The Various Levels of Meaning in the Chapter Titles of *Atlas Shrugged*," published in *Ayn Rand's* Atlas Shrugged: *A Philosophical and Literary Companion* (Farnham, Surrey, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2007), edited by Edward Younkins. To avoid any appearance of understandable bias on this reviewer's part, I will recommend those interested to read and compare both. It's a win-win!

Not all contributions were written for this volume. A case in point is Leonard Peikoff's "Reply to Whittaker Chambers," which was written on 28 December 1957 as a letter to the editors of *National Review*, which had published Chambers' disparaging review. Peikoff's effort is so devastating that I almost felt sorry for Chambers, except that he got precisely what he deserved. Reading this letter 53 years after it was written adds support to the claim that "revenge is a dish best served cold."

Scholars will appreciate the yeoman's work done by Gregory Salmieri in two appendices, one outlining *Atlas*; the other Galt's speech. He is also responsible for two essays in the collection: "*Atlas Shrugged* on the Role of the Mind in Man's Existence," and "Discovering Atlantis: *Atlas Shrugged*'s Demonstration of a New Moral Philosophy." Let me say two things about the former. He accuses Plato of

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"philosophical elitism," and compares him unfavorably to Thomas Jefferson's line in the Declaration of Independence, "All men are created equal." But he doesn't mention that Jefferson owned human beings!

When Salmieri tries to connect Dagny's intense physical attraction for Galt with her "deepest spiritual values," he grudgingly admits, "[t]he mere physical sensation of an orgasm, taken in isolation, may be pleasant" (in Mayhew, 241). Here I think Woody Allen is closer to the truth. In *Love and Death*, Diane Keaton says, "Sex without love is an empty experience," and Woody replies, "Yes, but as empty experiences go, it's one of the best."

Before reading Jeff Britting's essay, "Adapting *Atlas Shrugged* to Film," I was doubtful I could learn anything new. How wrong I was! I got as least three pleasant surprises from this piece. First, I was treated to Rand's shortest condensation of the whole novel. Here is the complete text:

> PART I
> The John Galt Line — The search for the Inventor of the Motor – Wyatt's torch.
>
> PART II
> The Moratorium on Brains (Directive 10-289) — The tunnel catastrophe — Dagny and "frozen train," her flight, her crash.
>
> PART III
> "Atlantis" and Galt — The progressive destruction of Chapter V (the copper wire) Dagny-Galt affair — the siege of Rearden Steel, & Rearden quitting — Galt's speech — the torture scene — the rescue. The Finale in Atlantis (202)

Second, I thought the last thing one would want to do in any attempt to adapt a huge novel to film would be to add characters (a hippie, among others) and additional dialogue, but that is exactly what Rand had in mind. If that isn't a tease to order the book today, I don't know what is, especially with the first of a three-part film adaptation of the novel making its debut in April 2011.

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Three, she actually claims to be able to shorten Galt's speech from her reading time of "four hours and twenty minutes" to "three to seven minutes." She then informs Michael Jaffe, a film producer, "I'll have to do it; no one else is equipped to do it" (204).

Britting also is kind enough to include a lot of Rand quotations—always a bonus.

Harry Binswanger's essay, "A Tale of Two Novels," is the most disappointing essay of the collection. He starts with a comparison of a scene from Joyce's *Ulysses* with a scene from *Atlas*—a sex scene from the former and a music listening scene from the latter. Why not two sex scenes? But let that pass. After quoting just two small paragraphs from each author, he writes, "Clearly, one of these novels is a stylistic masterpiece, and the other is trash" (192). I would say this is a tad hasty.

His next move is to tell us that everyone is either a Platonist or an Aristotelian, and that Joyce's fans are all Platonists, but Rand's fans are all Aristotelians. It seems to me that this is an empirical question for which all empirical evidence is lacking—or at least Binswanger provides none.

Speaking of disappointment, I can't convey how much I missed an essay by the editor, Mayhew. His effort in the *We The Living* volume comparing the revised edition with the original is my absolute favorite in all four of the books that he has edited on Rand's novels.

Six contributors provide two essays each, including Tore Boeckmann, Onkar Ghate, Allan Gotthelf, Shoshana Milgram (who is constitutionally incapable of writing "Rand"—she always writes "Ayn Rand" and that is so annoying that I simply skipped her essays), Gregory Salmieri (he also wrote both appendices,) and Tara Smith.

Of Smith's two essays, I prefer "'Humanity's Darkest Evil': The Lethal Destructiveness of Non-Objective Law." In only three paragraphs does she slip from her normally high quality analysis and all three missteps deal with the subject of anarchy (342–43). To claim that a theory that buys into the nonaggression principle endorses the "complete unleashing of force" is not to characterize but to caricature. With such an inauspicious start, the remainder of her argument lacks both seriousness and interest.

I've known Gotthelf since before the Rand/Branden split and his work is always impressive, especially when he is dealing with either

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Rand or Aristotle (his Plato not so much). Of his two contributions, I was initially attracted by the title of the first, to wit—"Galt's Speech in Five Sentences (and Forty Questions)"—but was ultimately overwhelmed by the second, "A Note on Dagny's 'Final Choice'." He makes a more than reasonable case for her final choice but beyond his arguments is the overall feeling I got while reading the essay. He combines two seemingly incompatible attributes: enlightenment and edification. As hard as this may be to believe, I felt as if I was reading Hegel and Kierkegaard at the same time. Thanks, Allan.

All fans of Rand will want to have these 500+ pages of "chewing" on *Atlas Shrugged.*

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